

Not Reading: The 800-Pound Mockingbird in the Classroom

More students than we want to admit do not complete assigned reading, choosing instead to employ what Broz calls the strategy of not reading. He offers several dos and don'ts for encouraging students to accept teachers' invitations to read.

Not reading, even for many good students, has become a mode of operation with respect to book-length texts assigned in school. Many students enter our secondary and postsecondary literature classes *intending to not read* the books we assign. If you think that most of your secondary literature students are reading the canonical texts you assign, you might have to think again. I say this because my undergraduate students in general education literature courses and English education courses (at three different universities) have been telling me this and demonstrating it to me for twelve years. Many students have admitted to me and to their classmates that in high school they did not read any of the assigned books.

Again this semester, I will assign *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKM) to the college seniors (mostly English majors) in my secondary literature methods course. I will do this because TKM is one of the most frequently assigned books in high school English classrooms and, thus, one of the most often *not read*. These points will be verified when I ask the class how many students were assigned to read that book in high school. The hands of most students in the room will go up. And when I then ask, “Truthfully, how many of you who were assigned to read TKM actually read it cover to cover?” nearly all of those hands will stay on the desks. Even though I already know some of the answers, I will say dramatically, “You are English majors who intend to become secondary English teachers! How could it be that you did not read the books assigned in

English classes in high school?” The main answer will be, “You didn’t have to. You could still get good grades.” Then I will assert to them what I am asserting to *EJ* readers now: *If students do not read the assigned texts, nothing important is happening in your literature classroom*—nothing very important to develop your students’ reading and interpretive abilities is happening, no matter how many lectures you deliver, vocabulary words students “learn,” elements of fiction students define, quizzes students take, essay test answers students write, or films you show. Nothing important is happening because student development of reading and interpretive abilities requires engaged reading. Overcoming the phenomenon of *not reading* then becomes a primary focus of my methods course for the rest of the semester.

Yet, despite this stated course focus, 20% of the students in the methods class will still attempt another *not reading* of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Not reading* is such a strong mode of operation that at least two students will attempt to write reading response journals, student-generated discussion items, and short literary essays based on reading SparkNotes and other Internet chapter summaries they find among the 2.5 million Google hits on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with such site titles as “Grade Saver: *To Kill a Mockingbird*”; “The *To Kill a Mockingbird* Student Survival Guide”; and “*To Kill a Mockingbird* Summary, Study Guide With Notes, Essays, Quotes, and Pictures.” Sadly, every semester, one or two students are dismissed from the class for plagiarism. Another two or three students will

not believe me when I say that *not reading* will lead to failure in the course. Instead of reading they will wait for me to give them a way to avoid reading until it is too late and they have no journals, discussion items, or essays to turn in.

These experiences are the basis for my belief that my primary teaching goal in literature classes, whether secondary or postsecondary, is to convince students to accept the invitation to read the books. *Not reading* the books is the 800-pound mockingbird in any discussion of literature pedagogy.

In thinking about this teaching problem for the last few years, I planned to urge teachers to avoid assigning canonical texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for which the volume of Internet source material aimed at supporting student *not*

reading is enough to choke the interpretive voice out of any reader. *The Great Gatsby* yields 2.5 million Google hits; *The Scarlet Letter*, more than 1.2 million; *The Old Man and the Sea*, a puny 589,000 hits. But not assigning these books is a copout because it is what *we* do as classroom teachers as we

set up the invitation to read that suggests to students and later confirms for them that *not reading* will be a successful strategy. If we use study guides, comprehension quizzes, pseudo whole-class “discussions” that serve mainly to summarize and interpret the reading, and similar enabling strategies, we send the message to students that no engaged reading or individual interpretation of the text is necessary and that *not reading* the text is just fine.

In his foundational article about engaged learning, “The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy,” written before such terms as *engaged* and *authentic* were part of our professional discussion of language arts pedagogy, Peter L. McLaren reveals a common circumstance in many smoothly operating classrooms: *teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn*. In such classrooms everyone agrees to go through the motions while little learning is taking place. I assert that engaged reading and the social discourse that arises from sharing one’s reading with others represent a transformative ritual of the kind McLaren urges teachers to sponsor in classrooms.

To avoid creating pretend classrooms in which students do not read, we may use teaching and learning strategies that make reading necessary and then reward those students who have engaged in the authentic ritual of reading with the opportunity for social construction of knowledge based on those readings. That social construction of knowledge will occur during peer-to-peer book discussions and peer-to-peer sharing of textual interpretations through informal and formal writing and other performances. Simultaneously, we must have the integrity to admit that some small number of students who can read will not read, no matter what we do. If we plan our courses appropriately, *not reading* should mean that those students fail the course because they have no assignments to turn in. Students who can read and do not, have done nothing important enough to deserve passing grades in our classes, even if they have been present for every class period. When those few students fail, counselors or school psychologists can figure out why. We need to expect that our students will read the books we assign, and we need to teach and grade in ways that promote reading.

A List of Dos for Discouraging *Not Reading*

Recognize that knowing what happens in any particular book, even canonical books such as To Kill a Mockingbird, is of little importance compared to developing students’ abilities to read and make meaning from text. It is the transformative ritual of actually reading *TKM* that makes the book important, not knowing who killed Bob Ewell. *TKM* still engages me, enlightens me, instructs me, and transforms me during every subsequent reading, though I have known what happens in the book for four decades. As with our writing pedagogy that focuses on teaching composing processes, in teaching literature we are teaching reading and interpretive processes, not right answers about a particular book.

Some students actually say to me, “I did read several books in high school, but I am already a senior in college and no professor in college has asked me about those books. What was the point of reading them?” Teachers who try to sell books with the line “You have to know this stuff for college” are part of the problem. Secondary students who will

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be most successful in college literature courses are those who know how to read and interpret literature and have read a lot, thereby developing and maintaining strong *reading and interpretive abilities*, not students who remember the name of Jem's and Scout's snooty aunt.

Ask students to capture their reader responses to texts in journals or other informal writing that you review and grade and that students use to develop and refine their interpretations (Broz, "Reasons" 94; Youngblood). If you sponsor and value these kinds of reading and interpretive activities, students will also come to value their own readings. This student valuing will occur for several reasons. First, I give credit for informal journal writing and discussions that grow out of it. Second, small-group discussions based on student-generated reading responses and interpretations immediately demonstrate to student participants that what they and their classmates think about the book is interesting and important. Also, instructor and peer response to the drafts of short interpretive literary essays students write based on their own readings and interpretations will validate the whole process. Finally, most students will quickly realize that the easiest way to produce these written performances is in accompaniment to reading the book. Reading response journals will clearly tell you which students have read the book and how engaged their readings have been. Reading response journals and items for discussion (see explanation below) are not only strategies for student engagement and assessment tools. They also provide opportunities for teaching and learning, allowing teachers to nudge individual students into higher levels of reasoning and deeper interpretations. As assessments of reading engagement, journals and discussion items are of much higher quality and more accurate than quizzes and tests that can be copied, guessed at, or passed based on *not reading* strategies.

I require that reading response journals and discussion items include frequent page-numbered references covering the whole book. Journal entries made up of general comments, or retelling the story, that do not contain questions, quotes, and comments accompanied by page-numbered passage references and which do not cover the whole book, do not meet the assignment guidelines and are assumed to have been created based on *not reading* strategies.¹

Invite students to read books that they can read and that they might want to read. Common readings should be accessible to all students. But common readings should make up only some of the reading invitations. Along with common readings, students should be invited to choose titles from units comprised of multiple copies of multiple titles organized by author, genre, or theme allowing all students to find their interest and reading ability while developing their reading and interpretive processes. Even in the ninth and tenth grades, thematic units can be anchored by a young adult title accessible to most students. The rest of the books in a thematic unit can include titles representing a range of reading abilities, most of which fall within the high school range, but some of which are accessible to struggling and advanced readers. Teaching strategies such as pairing the reading of a classic text with a young adult text as promoted by Joan F. Kaywell and others also insert accessible books into the curriculum that may help break the *not reading* cycle. Bonnie Ericson suggests using Mildred Taylor's *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* and other titles to support student reading and interpretation of *TKM*. I am not saying don't teach canonical texts. I am saying that when you invite students to read canonical texts, make sure you have positioned those students to accept the invitation to read.

Support students in developing their reading and interpretive abilities by inviting them to read any high-quality text, including popular texts, young adult texts, regional and culturally relevant texts, and texts in non-traditional formats such as graphic novels. Including some of these kinds of text can help break the cycle of *not reading*. Units containing multiple copies of multiple titles around a theme or author can contain some titles from all these categories, including canonical titles. Most importantly, offering accessible titles such as YA titles or popular titles as the first books you assign in a semester invites back into the game students who formerly enjoyed reading but who have stopped.

Young adult and popular titles are often devoid of easily accessible materials that support *not reading*. Beginning the semester with a common reading of a culturally relevant book by a local author catches students off-guard, makes them consider giving up the strategy of *not reading*, and may be an irresistible invitation to read. By beginning

the semester with successful reading and interpretive experiences, supported by good grades (I grade easier at the beginning while I am teaching students the class processes), I can make students believers in the proposition that I do value their interpretive responses. Beginning the semester with lively small-group discussion in which they have taken authoritative stances, students are usually motivated to be prepared for the next peer discussion. Being left out is no fun.

Some teachers use strategies that support *not reading* because they feel the need to compensate for the low reading abilities of some students. But even for poor readers, *not reading* is a useless and counterproductive strategy. Listening to the teacher summarize the story will not help struggling readers develop; only reading will. Differentiating texts and assignments is a better way of addressing differences in students' abilities.

Imagine an eleventh-grade American Literature class in which students were invited to read and respond to three stories by the same author in a particular week. The best readers would be expected to read and respond in reading journals to all of the stories. Grades of A required that. But a reading response journal that demonstrated engaged reading and developing interpretations of one story could earn a C. A selection of Steinbeck novels would work especially well. Struggling readers could read, respond to, and discuss one or two of the shorter novels, while the best readers could challenge themselves with *East of Eden*. In this context—where number of books and number of pages counted less than the dictate that every student read and compose journals for the whole time—many good readers would rise to the level of *East of Eden*. When the time for reading ended, every student could use his or her reading response journal to find a topic and formulate a thesis about something of interest in Steinbeck and of interest to them. Ideally students would experience engaged reading and have significant opportunity to develop their interpretive abilities. Struggling readers would also have these opportunities, but they would read fewer, more accessible, or shorter texts. Accommodating struggling readers would not mean advanced readers went unchallenged. This course was how I taught my own eleventh-grade English class, and I can attest that the

students' engagement with the text far outstripped what I witnessed when I used more traditional approaches that inadvertently fostered *not reading*.

Encourage student reading by facilitating small-group book discussions and other student-centered activities that support reading. Sponsor these activities during the reading of the books instead of after the books are supposed to have been read. The activities should be based on student readings and interpretations. In these efforts, avoid right-answer activities such as quizzes and study guides.

Though much has been written about Reading Circles (Daniels) and other similar book-group strategies, I use a simple approach to managing peer-to-peer book-group discussions using student-generated discussion items. Discussion Items, or "DIs," as I call them, help students begin to refine their interpretations as well as prepare for small-group discussion.²

First, students produce reading response journals while reading any book-length text. Periodically, sometimes daily, while reading is in progress, students are invited to "mine" their journals for DIs (i.e., questions, comments, or quotes) they want to discuss in small groups. As artifacts of student reading and interpretation, the DIs, which I "check" but do not grade before small-group discussion, show me that students have read the text and that they are prepared for discussion. Students with no DIs are obviously not prepared and need more reading time. Students with no DIs are not granted entrée to a book group. They read while the prepared students discuss. *Not reading* is no longer an option. During these discussions students take turns round-robin fashion, bringing up each of their three to five DIs. After a point is adequately discussed, the student records a summary of the responses he or she received to the discussion item right on the DI sheet. Grading the DIs later, I can easily encourage deeper interpretations of the text. The response summaries also tell me something about each student's engagement in small-group discussion and allow me to value, with credit, these social construction of knowledge activities.

Invite students to participate in a robust interpretive process that involves choosing their own points of interpretation, refining the articulation of those interpretations, and presenting those interpretations to the community of readers that is the class through short literary essays and

other performances such as *graphic response to literature* (Broz, “The Green Knight”). Generally, we should be asking students to do what good adult readers do—read books they like, often for the social purpose of sharing their readings and interpretations with family members, reading partners, or book groups—all audiences of their peers who really want to know what each individual reader thought about the book. It is true that good adult readers do not write essays about the books they read outside of the school setting; however, they could. And coming to a book club meeting prepared to discuss themes, characters, passages, and other personal and cultural interpretations is similar to having drafted a short literary essay.

A Few Don'ts for Discouraging Not Reading

Don't spend class time recapping or summarizing assigned reading chapters to compensate for students' not reading. This summarizing often comes in the guise of large-group class “discussions.” In *The Language of Interpretation: Patterns of Discourse in Discussions of Literature*, James D. Marshall, Peter Smagorinsky, and Michael W. Smith found a consistent pattern that shows these interactions to be little more than oral “fill-in-the-blank” exercises. While the teachers in this study envisioned student-centered discussions, the reality was that teachers controlled the talk in which only a few students participated while the rest passively withdrew. The teachers’ turns at speaking were two to five times longer than students’ turns, and questions posed in the discussions were nearly always the teachers’. Teachers’ turns generally followed a pattern of “inform/question/respond,” informing students about the text, questioning students about the text, then responding to students’ brief answers by repeating or elaborating on them and using the students’ answers as transitions in weaving a discourse that the teacher constructed (54–55). *A teacher summarizing and interpreting the text makes student reading unnecessary.* Choose good books that students can read and should like and then behave in class as if you expect them to be reading the books. For those who cannot read, your school should provide special remedial reading classes and other special student accommodations. Let fail those who can read but refuse to

read, only because we know that if they have not read the text, nothing important for them has happened in the class—by *not reading* they are not becoming better readers and interpreters of texts.

McLaren notes that teachers who engage students in authentic rituals (such as reading) can expect that those rituals will exert both “centripetal and centrifugal pulls” (164). When most students actually begin reading and discussing the book, the centripetal force of those rituals will bind the class into a community of readers. However, the centrifugal force of *not reading* when most people are will (metaphorically) hurl those who can read but don’t out of the community. Teachers can keep the community of readers from forming by making excuses for, ignoring, and ultimately validating students who chose *not reading*. While some students who do not read some portions of some books can survive in my classes, they cannot thrive—they cannot receive an A or B in the course. By taking steps to address *not reading*, many teachers can considerably reduce the portion of students *not reading* in their classes and ensure that those who don’t read have their performance honestly, accurately, and properly evaluated, and noted by a poor grade.

Don't use film versions of books as crutches or rewards. If students know you are going to show the movie, especially if your class is focused on right answers about what happens in the story, then it makes sense to not read. Watching a film, with the right instruction, might make students more filmic or visually literate, but it will not, by itself, make them better readers or more likely to read. Further, the filmmakers have already made highly professional interpretations of the text, interpretations that stifle students’ interpretations based on their readings. What student reader can conclude that Atticus Finch is a cold and distant father after viewing director Robert Mulligan and screenwriter Horton Foote’s interpretation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Don't make literature a right-answer game by assigning comprehension quizzes and tests or lecturing and testing over “received interpretations,” which students must parrot back to receive credit. Study guides are also right-answer instruments that tell students that they should be noticing what the teacher or writers of prepared educational materials who made the study guide think they should be noticing. Study guides devalue students’ readings and tell them


that what is really important is filling in all of the blanks on the study guide and memorizing that information for the test. Once students learn that it does not matter what they think, then copying the answers to the study guide or filling in the blanks based on Internet chapter summaries is a reasonable strategy. *If we do the reading and interpretation for students, we have no right to expect them to read the books.*

The same goes for making the structure of the novel or definitions of the elements of fiction the basis of a right-answer game. There is nothing wrong with presenting students with these terms and their meanings, because these are terms that help people articulate their responses to books. But do not overdo it or let testing on “climax” or “foreshadowing” become an end in itself. Mature readers read to *experience* the book, not primarily to analyze narrative style or dissect inventive authorial moves.

Encouraging Lifelong Readers

Many good students who have been successful in school have thrived using the strategy of *not reading*. Therefore it must be that many of the teaching strategies we have used in literature classes have allowed or even caused *not reading* to be the strategy of choice for these students. I know that some teachers reading this article will say, “I use study guides and lectures summarizing the assigned reading, but my students still read the books.” Are you sure the students actually read the books? You might be surprised if you knew how many do not.

I will keep inviting my literature methods students to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it is the perfect vehicle for convincing future literature teachers that they must overcome the phenomenon of *not reading*, in themselves and in their future

students. I will do all I can to ensure they accept this invitation to read (or reread) and proceed on their journey toward becoming lifelong readers and literature teachers whose students actually read the books. 

Notes

1. To request journal and discussion item guidelines, please email the author.
2. I learned about student-generated questions and comments for discussion from Virginia Broz, who developed and refined this technique teaching eighth-grade literature.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Facilitating Student-Led Seminar Discussions with *The Piano Lesson*” uses August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson* to invite students to ask a number of questions—big and small—about the characters, setting, conflict, and symbols in the work. After reading the first act, students learn how to create effective discussion questions and then put them to use in student-led seminar discussions before the second act and again at the end of the play. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/facilitating-student-seminar-discussions-30584.html>